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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3831
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001771

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/06/2026
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SAUDI AMBASSADOR WORRIED ABOUT SINIORA'S
SAFETY, DOWNBEAT ON SYRIA'S INTENTIONS

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (S) In a 5/5 meeting with the Ambassador, Saudi Ambassador Abdulaziz Khoja insisted that there is no current "Saudi initiative" to reduce Syrian-Lebanese tension. He expressed deep worry about Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's safety. He cited a recent article in al-Hayet by Syria's Ambassador to Washington as particularly alarming, as Khoja interpreted the article as an explicit threat to Siniora's life akin to what faced Rafiq Hariri. Syria, Khoja insisted, will work to undermine Lebanon's stability at least as long as Siniora remains PM. The Syrians prefer one of two other Sunnis as Lebanese PM: Saad Hariri, whom they want to lure to Damascus with promises of concessions (perhaps even including removal of President Emile Lahoud) to score PR points offsetting the Brammertz investigation, or Najib Mikati, whom they are convinced will be reliably pro-Syrian despite recent wayward wanderings. Believing that Siniora will remain in place for now unless killed, Khoja expressed annoyance with Hariri for not supporting his PM more vigorously and for not funding charitable projects in Lebanon. Hariri, according to Khoja, has already lost the north Lebanese Sunnis and is losing ground even in Beirut. Uncharacteristically critical of Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, Khoja described the 5/28 Blue Line incidents and the 6/1 Hizballah demonstrations in Beirut as "mistakes" that derived from Nasrallah's "arrogance." Still, both incidents will, Khoja predicted, have a chilling impact on the 6/8 National Dialogue session. End summary.

NO SAUDI INITIATIVE

2. (S) Responding to the Ambassador's questions about the ever-active Lebanese rumor mill, Khoja insisted that Saudi Arabia is not currently trying to mediate between Lebanon and Syria. There is no "Saudi initiative" on the table, he said, and he dismissed the Sudanese mediation as simply Arab League nonsense. While Saudi Arabia believes that Syria and Lebanon must strive to reduce the tensions between them, neither side has asked the Kingdom to help. Given the ill will over the January "Saudi initiative," Khoja expressed reluctance to get involved without the parties' request. The Ambassador noted that UNSCR 1559, UNSCR 1680, and the Lebanese National Dialogue all place obligations on the Syrians to respond and that Saudi Arabia would not seem to need a Syrian or Lebanese request to encourage Syrian complicity. Khoja was noncommittal.

IMAD MUSTAPHA REVEALS THREAT TO SINIORA'S LIFE

3. (S) Khoja said that he was deeply worried about Fouad Siniora's safety. In his view, the Syrians want him dead in order to sow chaos in Lebanon. That message was made explicitly clear in Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustapha's barely veiled attack on Siniora in al-Hayet newspaper recently. Urging the USG to take the article seriously, Khoja said that he considered the article to be a direct threat, linking Siniora to UNSCR 1680 in the same way the Syrians tarred Rafiq Hariri prior to his murder with UNSCR 1559. Khoja said that he has told Siniora that he must take more precautions and stop appearing at so many public events. (Note: The Ambassador saw Siniora at two back-to-back open air events on Friday alone. End note.) Pressed by the Ambassador, Khoja said that Saudi Arabia had no specific information indicating a threat to Siniora's

life, but he was nevertheless convinced such a threat exists and originates in Syria.

SYRIA PREFERS (FOR DIFFERENT REASONS)
EITHER HARIRI OR MIKATI AS PM

14. (S) Moreover, Khoja continued, Syria will never help Lebanon or even support Lebanese stability and security for at least as long as Siniora is PM. The Ambassador asked whether Khoja truly believed that Syria would play a more constructive role with any other PM freely selected by the Lebanese. Siniora, after all, is a moderate, and some Sunnis might be aggressively anti-Syrian. Khoja said that he thought that Syria wanted one of two candidates to be PM and would go quite far in offering concessions to support their

BEIRUT 00001771 002 OF 003

candidacies, at least at first. Syria, Khoja insisted, would love for Saad Hariri to be PM, and the sooner the better. The Syrians are starting to worry about the UNIIIC investigation into Rafiq Hariri's death, and it would be a great PR coup for them to host Hariri now. The Syrians would probably go quite far in taking steps to encourage a Hariri premiership, Khoja said, perhaps even to the point of a solution to the problem of President Emile Lahoud. Syria's price would be for Hariri to make an official visit to Damascus, thus relieving the SARG of some of the international odor clinging to them because of Rafiq Hariri's assassination.

15. (S) Syria's other preferred PM candidate would be former PM Najib Mikati, a longtime ally of Bashar al-Asad. Mikati, Khoja said, has been slightly at odds since late last year with the Asad family, and he is not a Syrian puppet. But the Syrians believe that Mikati will pursue Syria-friendly, pro-Arab policies. Khoja noted that he shared that analysis. While Mikati is too smart to be involved with pro-Syrian rallies in Lebanon such as the 6/1 Tripoli demonstrations commemorating the anniversary of the 1987 assassination of Rashid Karami, he is in general a safe choice for the Syrians. Indeed, Mikati may intentionally be keeping the Syrians a bit at arm's length for tactical reasons, perhaps even with the SARG blessing, Khoja noted, in order to remain a viable candidate as PM.

SAAD HARIRI NEEDS TO SUPPORT SINIORA

16. (S) Yet, whatever Syria prefers, Khoja speculated that Siniora will remain the Lebanese PM for months to come, "unless he is killed." Politically, it is "impossible" to change the cabinet now, given the requirement that Lahoud must sign a new cabinet decree. Given the probability of Siniora's continued tenure, Khoja noted his annoyance with Saad Hariri for not putting his full support behind the PM he created. Siniora is fighting the Syrians and trying to prevail against Hizballah and the Palestinian militants. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri is not helping him. March 14 "radicals" do not think Siniora's moderation is the right approach. Michel Aoun is actively trying to undermine him. Now more than ever, Siniora needs the full backing of Hariri, yet Hariri is withholding his support and undermining him with criticisms and under-the-table deals Siniora learns about from others and only belatedly.

17. (S) Asked by the Ambassador why Hariri would be so dismissive of Siniora at a time when Siniora's success or failure will be attributed to the whole Hariri political enterprise, Khoja mused that Hariri is getting bad advice from a circle of jealous advisors who flatter Saad at everyone else's expense. Look, Khoja said, at Hariri's inner circle: Ghattas Khoury is not trusted by his own Maronite community; Bassam Saba' is not trusted by his fellow Shia; ditto for Farid Makkari with the Orthodox; the Sunnis don't like fellow Sunnis Wissam Hassan and Hani Hamoud. "And no one likes Salim Diab."

HARIRI NOT SPENDING MONEY,
THUS ERODING HIS POLITICAL SUPPORT

18. (S) Khoja (like many Embassy contacts) also claimed that Hariri is not paying sufficient attention to his Lebanese constituents. He has paid no money in the north since the elections, Khoja said, with the various Hariri foundations not doing any charitable work. As evidenced by the thousands of people who turned out for the Rashid Kaami commemoration that turned into a pro-Syrian ally, Hariri has already "lost" Tripoli and the north. Hariri, Khoja insisted, is even losing ground in Beirut, due to his frequent travels, lack of charitable work, and general neglect of his "political homework." Khoja said that he would have very frank conversation with Hariri when he returns this week for the National Dialogue. He mused that Hariri still has one

foot in Saudi Arabia and business, and one foot in Lebanon and politics, which leads to neglect of the responsibilities of the latter. Whereas Rafiq Hariri could be both politician and a businessman, and succeed at both, Saad may not have the experience or even desire to do so.

NASRALLAH'S "MISCALCULATIONS"

19. (S) The Ambassador asked Khoja for his interpretation of

BEIRUT 00001771 003 OF 003

the 5/28 Blue Line violence started from the Lebanese side and the 6/1 Hizballah riots responding to a television comedy act parodying Nasrallah. Khoja (who has displayed a seeming infatuation with Nasrallah in the past) was critical of Nasrallah, calling both events "mistakes." With Iranian backing and funding behind him and surrounded by fawning supplicants, Nasrallah has become arrogant and miscalculated the popular reaction against both incidents. Still, Khoja thought, the power of Hizballah was clear in both events. Whereas the March 14 leaders would have public opinion on their side in approaching the June 8 National Dialogue session, Khoja still believed that Hizballah's actions would nevertheless have a chilling impact on the debate.

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